

New War Rumors: U.S. Plans To Seize Pakistan's Nuclear Arsenal

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Two recent news items emanating from the United States have begun to reverberate in Pakistan and give rise to speculation that growing American drone strikes and NATO helicopter attacks in that country may be the harbingers of far broader actions: Nothing less than the expansion of the West's war in Afghanistan into Pakistan with the ultimate goal of seizing the nation's nuclear weapons.

The News International, Pakistan's largest English-language newspaper, published a report on October 13 based on excerpts from American journalist Bob Woodward's recently released volume "Obama's Wars" which stated that during a trilateral summit between the presidents of the U.S., Afghanistan and Pakistan on May 6 of 2009 Pakistani head of state Asif Ali Zardari accused Washington of being behind Taliban attacks inside his country with the intent to use them so "the US could invade and seize its nuclear weapons." [1]

Woodward recounted comments exchanged at a dinner with Zardari and Afghan-born Zalmay Khalilzad, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations (2007-2009), to Iraq (2005-2007) and Afghanistan (2003-2005). Khalilzad was also a close associate of Jimmy Carter administration National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, architect of the U.S. strategy to support attacks by armed extremists based in Pakistan against Afghanistan starting in 1978, when he joined the Polish expatriate at Columbia University from 1979-1989.

The baton for what is now Washington's over 30-year involvement in Afghanistan was passed from Brzezinski to Khalilzad in the 1980s when the latter was appointed one of the Ronald Reagan administration's senior State Department officials in charge of supporting Mujahedin fighters operating out of Peshawar in Pakistan. He joined the State Department in 1984 on a Council on Foreign Relations fellowship and worked for Paul Wolfowitz, then-Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, at Foggy Bottom. His efforts were augmented by the Central Intelligence Agency's deputy director at the time, Robert Gates, now U.S. defense secretary. Two of their three chief clients, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani, are founders and leaders of Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin and the Haqqani network, against whom Gates' Pentagon is currently waging war on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

According to Woodward's account of the Pakistani president's accusations to Khalilzad in May of last year, "Zardari dropped his diplomatic guard. He suggested that one of...two countries was arranging the attacks by the Pakistani Taliban inside his country: India or the US. Zardari didn't think India could be that clever, but the US could. [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai had told him the US was behind the attacks, confirming the claims made by

the Pakistani ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence].” [2]

Khalilzad, whose résumé also includes stints at the Defense Department, the National Security Council, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the National Endowment for Democracy, the RAND Corporation (where he assisted in establishing the Middle East Studies Center) and the Project for the New American Century, reportedly took issue with Zardari’s contention, which led to the latter responding that what he had described “was a plot to destabilize Pakistan,” hatched in order that, according to Woodward’s version of his words, “the US could invade and seize [Pakistan’s] nuclear weapons.”

The account stated Zardari “could not explain the rapid expansion in violence otherwise. And the CIA had not pursued the leaders of the Pakistani Taliban, a group known as Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan or TTP that had attacked the government. TTP was also blamed for the assassination of Zardari’s wife, Benazir Bhutto.”

In the Pakistani president’s words: “We give you targets of Taliban people you don’t go after. You go after other areas. We’re puzzled.”

When Khalilzad mentioned that U.S. drone attacks inside Pakistan “were primarily meant to hunt down members of al Qaeda and Afghan insurgents, not the Pakistan Taliban,” Zardari responded by insisting “But the Taliban movement is tied to al Qaeda...so by not attacking the targets recommended by Pakistan the US had revealed its support of the TTP. The CIA at one time had even worked with the group’s leader, Baitullah Mehsud,” Zardari asserted. [3] (Three months later a CIA-directed drone strike killed Mehsud, his wife and several in-laws and bodyguards.)

In August of 2009, while still commander of all U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, then-General Stanley McChrystal issued his classified COMISAF (Commander of International Security Assistance Force) Initial Assessment which asserted the “major insurgent groups in order of their threat to the mission are: the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), the Haqqani Network (HQN), and the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG).” [4] The first is an Afghan Taliban group which as its name indicates is based in the capital of Pakistan’s Balochistan province.

Steve Coll, Alfred McCoy and other authorities on the subject have documented the CIA’s involvement with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani: That they were shared with if not transferred by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence to the CIA as private assets. Coll has additionally claimed that Haqqani sheltered and supported Osama bin Laden starting in the 1980s.

At the meeting between Obama, Zardari and Karzai in May of 2009, the American president slighted his two counterparts for alleged lack of resolve in prosecuting the war on both sides of the Durand Line, although even as he spoke Pakistan was engaged in a major military assault in the Swat Valley which led to the displacement of 3 million civilians.

Four days after the dinner exchange between Zardari and Khalilzad, the Pakistani president appeared on the May 10 edition of NBC’s Meet the Press on a program which also included Afghan President Karzai and Steve Coll, now president and CEO of the New America Foundation and author of Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001 (2004) and The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century (2008).

Zardari's comments to his American audience included the claim that the Taliban "was part of your past and our past, and the ISI and the CIA created them together. And I can find you 10 books and 10 philosophers and 10 write-ups on that...." [5]

That the leaders of the other two armed groups identified by McChrystal – Haqqani and Hekmatyar – were among the three Mujahedin leaders financed, armed and trained by the CIA (the late Ahmed Shah Massoud being the third), makes the pattern complete: Robert Gates the defense secretary is leading a war against forces that Robert Gates the deputy director of the CIA earlier supported through one of the Agency's longest and most expensive covert programs, Operation Cyclone.

After retiring from public life, George Kennan, the main architect of U.S. Cold War policy, cited a line he ascribed to Goethe to warn that in the end we are all destroyed by monsters of our own creation. To emend Voltaire, the White House rather than God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh.

Woodward's account of last year's comments by Pakistan's president and Zalmay Khalilzad could be dismissed as merely anecdotal if not for an article that appeared in the New York Post on October 3 and developments in Pakistan itself over the past six weeks.

Arthur Herman, a visiting scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute think tank, stated in an article entitled "Our Pakistan problem: Obama's approach is failing" that "The bitter irony is that even as Obama is trying to get out of the war in Afghanistan, he may be heading us into one in Pakistan."

The author detailed that whereas in 2009 the U.S. launched 45 Predator unmanned aerial vehicle (drone) attacks inside Pakistan, it had tripled that number by the time his article appeared, and that half as many as last year's total strikes had been launched this September alone.

Also mentioning the NATO helicopter attack in the Kurram Agency of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas on September 30 which killed three members of the Frontier Corps and that "Raids by the CIA's Counterterrorism Pursuit Team – with its 3,000 Afghan troops – into Pakistan are also becoming routine," Herman warned:

"All this adds up to a US effort in Pakistan highly reminiscent of the one we undertook in Laos in the 1960s – one of the springboards into the Vietnam quagmire.

"If Obama's growing pressure on Pakistan destabilizes that government, the only thing keeping that country's nukes out of the hands of al Qaeda may have to be US troops. That's a shooting-war scenario that will make Obama wish his name was Lyndon Baines Johnson." [6]

Herman attributes the expansion of the Afghan war into Pakistan at a qualitatively more dangerous level to the machinations of former CIA officer and current Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution Bruce Riedel and the commander of 152,000 U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan General David Petraeus.

A report of October 13 documented that since Petraeus took command of the war effort in Afghanistan in June there has been a 172 percent increase in U.S. and NATO air strikes, from

257 assault missions in September of 2009 to over 700 last month. In addition, "Surveillance flights increased to nearly three times the number from September 2009 and supply flights are up as well....Petraeus is sometimes seen as more willing to risk the so-called 'collateral damage' of civilian deaths....[7]

Last month's drone attacks were the most in any month since the targeted assassinations were started in 2004 and the amount of deaths they caused - over 150 - the highest monthly total to date.

By the middle of this month there have been at least eight drone attacks and no fewer than 66 people killed.

According to Steve Coll's New America Foundation, 1,439 of the 1,844 deaths caused by drone attacks in Pakistan since 2004 have occurred in 2009 and so far this year. [8]

Similarly, the deaths of 1,111 of 2,160 U.S. and NATO soldiers killed in Afghanistan since 2001 occurred in the same period. Seventeen foreign soldiers were killed between October 13 and 16 alone.

On October 13 the Pakistani press reported that NATO helicopters, until then operating solely in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (in four attacks between September 25-30 against the Haqqani network), violated the nation's airspace over the province of Balochistan, leading Islamabad to lodge a formal protest with NATO.

Since the revelations from Bob Woodward's new book and the publication of Arthur Herman's article, commentaries in Pakistani newspapers have appeared which indicate the seriousness with which recent developments and even more ominous portents are being viewed.

An October 13 feature in The Nation stated that "the ongoing war on terror in Afghanistan is aimed to take the operations into Pakistani territory....The real target is Pakistan's nuclear potential; they [the U.S. and NATO] have no plausible security threat from the ill-equipped Taliban or ragtag extremists."

Commenting on the New York Post feature cited earlier, Pakistani commentator A R Jerral further claimed that what "Herman suggests in his write-up is in fact a policy direction to the US administration. He implies that the policy of sending drones and attacking militant hideouts in the Pakistan territory has not worked....[T]he thrust is Pakistan's nukes. It is a tacit way to tell the policymakers in Washington to keep the pressure on our country, which will weaken the Pakistani government's standing, causing instability. That will provide the reason for the US troops to move in."

He added: "We know about the drone attacks as these are reported in the media, but what we do not know and our media does not report is the fact that US-led NATO forces are launching crossborder raids into Pakistan....For this, CIA is operating Counterterrorism Pursuit Teams in Afghanistan.

"These teams are regularly mounting ground raids into Pakistani territory."

"In this way, things are getting hot as far as the war on terror is concerned. Pakistan is moving to become centre stage in this war. Bruce Riedel, a former CIA and NSC [National Security Council] official, has advised Mr Obama to shift

the focus of war 'from Afghanistan to Pakistan'; this is what we are witnessing in the shape of heightened war effort into the Pakistan territory." [9]

A Pakistani commentary of the preceding day stated: "[W]e have...been dragged into giving the US access to Balochistan from where it has been attempting to destabilise the Iranian regime through support for the terrorist group Jundullah....Even more threatening, unless we change course now, we will have lost the battle to retain our nuclear assets because that is where the NATO-US trail is eventually leading to."

"The free-wheeling access to US covert military and intelligence operatives, both officials and private contractors, is another destabilising factor that we seem to be unable or unwilling to check. And now there are the NATO incursions into our territory and targeting of even our military personnel, which shows how servile a state we are living in at present. [10]

As the war in Afghanistan, the largest and longest in the world, proceeds with record casualties among civilians and combatants alike on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border, plans are afoot to further expand the war into Pakistan and to threaten Iran as well.

Comparisons to Washington's war in Indochina have been mentioned. [11] But Pakistan with its 180 million people and nuclear weapons is not Cambodia and Iran with its population of over 70 million is not Laos.

Notes

1) Shaheen Sehbai, Zardari says US behind Taliban attacks in Pakistan The News International, October 13, 2010

<http://www.thenews.com.pk/13-10-2010/Top-Story/1276.htm>

2) Ibid

3) Ibid

4) Washington Post, September 21, 2009

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/21/AR2009092100110.html>

5) Meet the Press, May 10, 2009

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30658135>

6) Arthur Herman, Our Pakistan problem: Obama's approach is failing New York Post, October 3, 2010

http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/our_pakistan_problem_1TqxfBu89mDxSIZHUtHj2K

Obama's Pakistan Failure American Enterprise Institute, October 3, 2010

<http://www.aei.org/article/102612>

7) ABC News Radio, October 13, 2010

8) New America Foundation

<http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones>

9) A R Jerral, Shifting war on terror to Pakistan The Nation, October 13, 2010

<http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/Opinions/Columns/13-Oct-2010/Shifting-war-on-terror-to-Pakistan>

10) Shireen M Mazari, Ending Collaboration with the US on the War on Pakistan The Dawn, October 12, 2010

<http://thedawn.com.pk/2010/10/12/ending-collaboration-with-the-us-on-the-war-on-pakistan>

11) NATO Expands Afghan War Into Pakistan Stop NATO, September 28, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/09/28/nato-expands-afghan-war-into-pakistan>

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